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Novara Media and the Rise of the Digital Left: From Scaffolding a Movement to 'Smashing that Like Button'

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Abstract: This paper explores the radical Left's evolving relationship with media, focusing on the transition from print to digital platforms. Historically, print media served as a central tool for agitation and organisation within socialist and labour movements from the late 18th century through the 20th century. However, the rise of digital media has transformed communication, contributing to broader shifts in social relations tied to neoliberalism. This paper examines Novara Media, a prominent digital platform in Britain, to explore the dynamics of the 'Postmodern Left.' It argues that while digital platforms have provided new opportunities for leftist politics, they have also fostered forms of activism that are detached from traditional working-class politics and large-scale social change. By contextualising this shift historically, the paper seeks to contribute to ongoing debates on the role of digital media in anti-capitalist political projects.

Keywords: digital media, activism, online activism, postmodern Left, anti-capitalism.

1. Introduction

The desire to be at the cutting edge of mass communication has, naturally, been a concern of the radical Left since its birth around two hundred years ago. For the majority of this time, this has chiefly meant print media. Inspired by the French Revolution and reaching beyond the Reform Bill of 1832 to the great Chartist agitation, Britain was awash with an eclectic mix of radical pamphlets and publications. The later growth of a socialist and labour movement continued the tradition of using print as a focal point of agitation and organisation into the late twentieth century, until the emergence of digital media began to challenge the hegemony of print. This transformation in popular communication was itself a key element in a re-making of social relations, related to the steady decline of manufacturing industry in western capitalist societies (Gray and Suri 2019, Harvey 1989, McNally 2006), the expansion of new service and knowledge-based sectors of the economy and the concomitant weakening of the traditional labour movement and civil society generally, as neoliberalism largely succeeded in imposing market rationalities into every aspect of life. (Dardot & Laval 2013).

Today, the political Left is largely online. Whereas what we might characterise as the traditional, or class-based Left has found this transition difficult, and experienced very limited success in making it, (therottenelements 2022), a new millennial Left has more naturally embraced it. In Britain, one of the most successful of these digital-based platforms has been *Novara Media* (NM), which, at the time of writing, has over 800,000 subscribers to its YouTube channel and around 500,000 monthly visits, as well as a presence across a range of other digital platforms (Maher 2024). In terms of its digital media presence, it currently outstrips all other similar British-based left-wing platforms.

While there has been much scholarly discussion of the role digital media has played in disparate political movements of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries (Downing, 2001; Howard and Hussain 2011; DeLuca, Lawson and Ye Sun 2012; Castells 2009; Milan 2013; Jenkins, Ford, and Green 2013; Gerbaudo 2019), while

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others have particularly focussed on the extent to which these new forms of media afford a greater possibility of censorship and surveillance (Hintz 2015, Fuchs 2014, Redden 2015), there has been less critical examination of the practice of specific platforms, and the ways in which this is illustrative of the limitations and contradictions of the movements associated with what Gerbaudo refers to as the ”netroots” generation, which has been shaped from the outset by digital technology and its related organisational forms. (Gerbaudo 2019, 13) The challenges involved in examining the social media landscape of the Left lie partly in its diversity, although platforms, certainly within the anglosphere, share common features and exert reciprocal influence on each other (Farrell 2023). Whilst politically diverse, such netroots media phenomena do, however, tend to share the common features associated with what I will refer to from here as the postmodern Left. If modernity was the result of both the destructive and creative processes of capitalism, for a significant part of its history, it was the relative strength and cohesion of the working-class which was able to advance its progressive aspects, politically and culturally (Harvey 1989). It was over a subdued working-class that various forms of social thought, invariably prefigured with the word ”post”, were in a position to reject class and the institutional forms of solidarity and activism that accompanied it, in favour of a fractured multiplicity of identities. While the contemporary Left is possibly a more amorphous phenomenon than ever before, the intertwined features of its politics and practice have been forged against this background, and while the response of various netroots media formations to this predicament is expressed and mediated in a variety of ways, it is the contention here that, whatever the nuances of the political positions they hold, they largely share an estrangement from working-class organisation, in both a practical and theoretical sense, that marks them apart from the class-based Left of a previous generation.

Whilst this study is not suggesting that there are no significant political differences between NM and other left-wing platforms, a critical examination of NM can be useful not only for what it tells us about this specific project, but more generally about the predicament online-based postmodern leftism finds itself in. Examining the continuities and ruptures between it and its predecessors will, therefore, hopefully contribute to a wider discussion on the applicability of digital media to anti-capitalist political projects, developing an understanding of the ways in which contemporary political activism and its media have evolved and can be understood in their social and historical context.

This will be achieved by first examining the central political function of print media for the radical movements and industrial Left of the nineteenth and early to mid-twentieth centuries, in order to set the discussion of the online Left into historical context. The recent rise of digital media and its use here will be discussed within the context of the ultimate defeat of the universalist political projects of the 19th and 20th centuries, arguing that the contemporary entrenchment in online eco-systems both reflects and exacerbates a detachment from working-class collectivity and large-scale social change which has characterised this evolution of Left politics, cultivating as it does specific forms of ”activism” more allied to manifestations of neoliberal subjectivity. As the scope of such a study is potentially so wide, it will be largely limited by considerations of brevity and focus here to the British context, although the phenomenon it describes and the conclusions it draws are likely to have a wider resonance in our globalised political atmosphere.

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2. Media as an Organiser

Thompson, in his classic analysis, identified social class as an antagonistic relationship, rooted in the productive process and ”embodied in traditions, value-systems, ideas, and institutional forms.” (Thompson 1966, p 10) These institutional forms progressed from secret societies, through to labour unions and political organisations, expressing, to varying degrees, radical critiques of capitalist political economy, and seeking to either overthrow the existing order or assume, by electoral means, administrative control of it in order to steer it in a direction that better served the interests of the working-class. These twin political traditions later became entrenched as revolutionary or reformist approaches, or as conceptions of social change arising either “from below” as opposed to ”from above” (Draper 2019.) What was common to both traditions, however, was the claim to speak to universalist projects of emancipation, and a social class --- the proletariat --- which, through its unique position within the productive relations of capitalism, could claim to embody, whether electorally or through extra-parliamentary means, the ultimate agency for that universalist project. The rise of print media not only allowed for the ”imagined community” of the nation to take root in popular consciousness (Anderson 2006), but was seen as invaluable in consolidating movements that sought to redress political imbalances of power and, increasingly, the new forms of exploitation being ushered in by the steady advance of industrial capital. This took the form of leaflets, posters, pamphlets and, above all, newspapers.

While the best and most successful of these attempted to be popular, they were not seeking to appeal to a passive audience, in the way the growing number of more popular bourgeoise newspapers at the time did, but to be ”consciously organized so as to relate to the working-class movement” (Sparks 1985). Because the focus was upon organisation and agitation, a further key fault line between the bourgeois and working-class press lay in the fact that the latter tended to be aimed at that section of the working-class further advanced in radical, anti-capitalist consciousness than the broad mass of their fellow proletarians, an orientation which was latent in the earliest radical and socialist publications, but which reached its most conscious theoretical elaboration with the advance of Leninism in the early twentieth century. This media, therefore, attempted to provide a bridge between the politically advanced minority and the larger mass. It is this connection between the specific forms of media, organisation and agitation that is crucial to understanding what was unique about the radical and socialist press generally, and to which we will return in our comparative discussion of the contemporary digital Left.

The radical movements of the 18th and early 19th centuries achieved some remarkable success in these endeavours, and provided a benchmark for the more mature labour movement which later emerged. Over the course of the early to mid-19th century in Britain, a resilient infrastructure was built around the radical press. In the face of often harsh state sanction and persecution, the early part of the century was, as Thompson informs us, an ”heroic age”, at a time when “editors, booksellers, and printers risked their shirts for the unstamped press, precisely because it was so patently effective a tool for political organisation.” (Thompson 1966,729). By the time of the passing of the Reform Bill of 1832, there was “a radical nucleus to be found in every county, in the smallest market towns and even in the larger rural villages”. In London and other major cities, there was something of a boom in coffee-houses and bookshops which doubled up as centres of subversive agitation and propagandising, such as John Doherty’s famous ”Coffee and Newsroom”, which was part of his bookshop in Manchester, where, Thompson informs us, around ninety-six papers were available each week, including the ”unstamped”. (Thompson 1966) Even in smaller

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towns, reading groups proliferated. Even the infamous Peterloo Massacre of 1819 proved unable to eradicate these networks of resistance.

Although the circulation of the radical press was prone to fluctuation, the figures for many publications were impressive. Cobbett's *2d Register*, on average, sold between 40,000 and 60,000 between October 1816 and early 1817. The *Black Dwarf* ran at about 12,000 in 1819, although Thompson speculates that this figure was "probably exceeded" following Peterloo. (Thompson 1966, 718). Each time the movement was forced back, it would later regroup and organisation and mass circulation of its press would re-emerge. The agitation around the Reform Bill of 1832 saw the birth of Chartism and a further boost to the purchase of radical political ideas. The Chartist *Northern Star*, first produced in 1837, had begun with a circulation of around 10,000 per week, but within just a year had risen to 50,000. As a significant proportion of the working population were still illiterate (Lloyd 2007), these figures inevitably underestimate the extraordinary reach that these publications achieved.

Towards the latter end of the century, a more explicitly socialist consciousness developed amongst the industrial working-class, and "several hundred periodicals representing a wide array of socialist perspectives were born" (Miller 2010, 702–712). Some of these were avowedly Marxist in outlook, such as *The Commonweal*, through to the vast array of publications connected to the Independent Labour Party, one of the most well-known being *The Labour Leader*, with its origins in a monthly paper intending to give a voice to Scottish mineworkers. In the early decades of the new century, the organisations which came together to form the British Communist Party naturally began producing their own papers, with considerable success, while the more independent *Daily Herald*, which began life as a strike bulletin amidst the labour unrest in 1911, reached an estimated circulation of 500,000 during the 1919 railway strike (Harman 1984).

Just as with the earlier radical papers and periodicals, the socialist press of this period was linked to both diverse forms of organisation and activism. These papers could not exist or survive without networks of activists, distributing the paper, writing for it, and reading it. This need for such networks was the case even when no formal political organisation was directly linked to it. The populist *Clarion*, founded in 1891, averaged at a circulation of around 40-50,000 per issue, and was associated with a vibrant social and cultural movement consisting of "Clarionette" cycling clubs, theatres, choirs, clubs and rambling societies. (Miller 2010). This largely remained the case into the latter half of the twentieth-century. The *New Socialist* magazine, for example, launched in the early 1980s, was organically linked to what at the time was a highly visible network of left-wing activists within the Labour Party, with an editorial team that included well-known socialist intellectuals, Labour MPs and trade union leaders. (Frost, 2020)

This organisational requirement stemmed only in part from the fact that the launching of a publication could, from a financial perspective, rarely be the work of a single or small group of individuals. More importantly, it arose from the need to build an active relationship to a movement. The interconnections between propaganda, activism and organisation reached their apogee, certainly in terms of theorisation, with the model of organisation most closely associated with Lenin and the Bolsheviks at the turn of the century. For many early twentieth-century Marxists, the pre-1917 *Pravda*, served as the Platonic ideal of the revolutionary newspaper. This role was set out in its most cogent form by Lenin in a series of polemical articles between 1900-1902, directed at rival groupings within the Russian socialist movement, in which the notion of the left press as a "collective organizer" providing the "scaffolding" for revolutionary

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activity was fully fleshed out. This model rejected the dichotomy between professional journalists and a passive readership in favour of a reciprocal relationship, in which its working-class audience raised money for the paper, wrote for it, and sold it to their fellow workers. This, in turn, necessitated the need to defend, face-to-face, the political positions the paper took. Lenin set out the essential features of this model thus:

> *A newspaper is not only a collective propagandist and a collective agitator, it is also a collective organiser. In this respect it may be compared to the scaffolding erected round a building under construction; it marks the contours of the structure and facilitates communication between the builders, permitting them to distribute the work and to view the common results achieved by their organised labour* (Lenin 1902).

Even as the early appeal of Bolshevism began to fade on the Left, it is remarkable how enduring the newspaper proved to be as a vehicle of propaganda and agitation. While the New Left of the 1960s may have attempted to exploit a range of media, initiating projects such as "Guerilla Television" (Boyle 1997), radio and even street theatre and performance art (Downing 2001), it remained through the medium of print that it achieved its most notable success, whether that be the politically eclectic *Black Dwarf* in the UK, or *The Black Panther*, mouthpiece of the Black Panther Party, which reached a circulation of 300,000 in the US, to become the most widely read Black newspaper between 1969-71 (Jennings 2015). As the existence of radical booksellers throughout Britain had depleted since its nineteenth-century heyday, papers of the Left were even more reliant upon an enthusiastic army of street-sellers (Ali 2018). Whilst the British Communist Party continued to produce a daily paper throughout the post-war period, still welding together a community of industrial activists and trade union officials, the post -1968 Trotskyist left attained its most successful circulation during the labour unrest of the early 1970s, with *Socialist Worker* briefly reaching a print run of around 50,000 in 1974 (Copley 2023). Similar circulation figures were claimed for the *Militant* newspaper during its most frenetic period of activity in the early 1980s (Massey 2018). In revealing contrast, the most significant expansion to date in NMs audience occurred during the Covid-19 lockdowns, a period of legally enforced inactivity and atomisation (Novara Media 2024).

3. The Decline of Working-Class Politics and the Digital Era

The almost wholesale replacement of print media as the primary vehicle for left-wing ideas and movements with digital platforms that has occurred over the past twenty years or so cannot be seen as merely a technological change, but rather one intertwined with structural changes within capitalism and the profound weakening of Western labour movements. In both the US and Britain, activism and militancy grounded in the labour movement, including at times overtly political militancy, reached a post-war peak in the early 1970s (Harman 1988, Winslow 2021). The social movements which had emerged in the West in the previous decade made some attempts to connect with these inchoate forms of working-class power, but the neoliberal assault which gathered pace from the latter part of the decade was largely successful in dissipating such alliances, as it sought to break apart the post-war compromises capital had made with organised labour, and shatter any means of effective collective resistance (Cox & Nilsen 2014).

By the time any organised form of anti-capitalist politics re-emerged, it was, as noted at the time, "no longer primarily aimed at transforming the social structure" but

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rather focused upon “the everyday anti-systemic actions of individuals” (Císař 2005). The dominant theoretical expositions of early 21st century anti-capitalism drew upon an intellectual foundation which had sought to rationalise the retreat of the Left and organised labour over the preceding thirty years. (Sivanadan 1990, Gorz 1994). Hardt and Negri’s popular model of an omnipresent global empire and a largely obsolete nation state explicitly rejected classical Marxism’s traditional focus on the working-class as the agency of radical social change, which would henceforth, according to this model, assume the form of spontaneous eruptions of direct action in a plurality of social spaces (Hardt & Negri 2000, 2004).

This eradication of working-class agency arose in tandem with a growing consensus regarding the rise of so-called ‘immaterial production’ and alongside new conceptions of an omnipresent neoliberal subjectivity. As Císař explained:

> *As the new capitalism’s key sources of production are no longer material resources but rather intellectual capacities developed directly at the level of individual consciousness, even small ‘revolutions’ in lifestyle and way of thinking may constitute anti-systemic breakthroughs… The bearer of the current communist revolution is not the working-class lead by the avant-garde…but the untamed and spontaneous multitude* (Císař 2005).

Despite such claims being somewhat overstated (Doogan 2009**)**, it was undeniably the case, certainly in the advanced capitalist economies of the West, that the type of industries most closely associated with a robust labour movement were in inexorable decline. This, coupled with a series of high-profile defeats for key groups of well-organized trade unionist in the 1980s, meant that the notion of the “multitude” replacing class was in a powerful position to make a full-frontal intellectual assault on the notion of class agency, and, inevitably, the tradition of organising that had accompanied it, replacing it with a heterogeneous movement of essentially isolated subjects, who may be fleetingly thrown together, but lacked a focused, common enemy. This represented a historic retreat not just of the minority tradition of revolutionary socialism on the western Left, but also of mass-based reformist social democracy, with disparate social justice movements catering to the “ideological needs of a post-political end-of-ideology discourse” of the new middle class, that “defines socialist universalism as outmoded”. (Léger 2022, 4-5). It was from within this milieu that the first significant anti-capitalist digital media emerged in the form of the ”Indymedia” of the late 1990s (Farrell 2023).

In the United States and Britain, the electoral movements mobilised behind Bernie Sanders and Jeremy Corbyn temporarily galvanised the postmodern Left once again behind the traditional vehicles of progressive liberalism and social democracy, respectively, representing, at least partially, a return to political universalism based upon an appeal to class. It is notable, however, that while the short-lived momentum of these movements left no enduring organisation, they spurred a second-wave plethora of leftist digital platforms and commentary, many of which still largely define themselves in relation to them.

Both these campaigns, in their unique ways, proved to be defining moments for this milieu, providing a measure of its organisational strengths and weaknesses, as well as a test of whether the politics that had come to define it could radicalise a wider, working-class constituency. The core of this movement consisted mainly of younger people concentrated in the knowledge-based sectors of the economy that now dominated the Left. This helps to explain why, as Léger further argues, that when push came to shove, these efforts “proved unable to re-establish a universalist politics of solidarity beyond

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identitarian fragmentation", with both Sanders and Corbyn ultimately failing to redirect in sufficient weight, the "politically confused rage (felt by many working people) about their government and their condition". (Léger 2022, 10).

4. The Advance of the Online Left

The Sanders and Corbyn campaigns involved the extensive deployment of social media, producing content that utilised all major digital platforms, indicating the extent to which support for both these elder statemen was rooted amongst Gen Z and millennials. This led to a further burst of optimism for the organising potential of such platforms for the Left, following the disorientating shocks of the Trump election victory and, equally traumatic for many on the British left, the Brexit vote. Tarnoff (2017) articulated this new optimism regarding the role many believed digital platforms could play in building support for a resurgent left-wing electoralism, here framed as "one of the most crucial and least understood catalysts of contemporary socialism", beginning from an already established left-wing presence in the independent digital media landscape. In the UK, this had taken off with the *Another Angry Voice* blog and NM in 2010, *Skwarkbox* in 2012, and *The Canary* and *Evolve Politics* in 2015. All of these were well-placed to provide support for the Corbyn project, isolated as it was amongst the solidly right-centrist parliamentary party and a uniformly hostile mainstream media. Whilst situated within the genealogy of digital leftist media originating in the Occupy movements, NM and similar platforms faced the challenge of creating sustainable structures and funding (Farrell, 2023).

NM began on community radio in 2010, transferring to YouTube in 2013, since which time it has experienced steady growth. By 2015, there was a website, and they were making regular videos. Its origins were not in the Labour Party, but in the briefly explosive movement against student tuition fees which erupted in 2010, of which the platform's original founders, Aaron Bastani and James Butler, were both activists in. Ash Sarkar and Michael Walker joined later, around the time Corbyn became Labour leader. With the growth of the platform, a number of other regular contributors have since arrived.

NM came into being, therefore, at a time when the mainstream British media were at once fully supportive of austerity and the neoliberal status quo, but simultaneously recognizing that a significant section of the population, particularly younger people, were moving leftwards in terms of both social and economic positions, although this was always a far more complex and nuanced phenomenon than is sometimes suggested (Meadway 2021). It did mean, however, that the young, media-friendly faces at NM were beginning to be routinely invited onto mainstream media outlets to "balance" the centrist narratives which had previously dominated them, which in turn built their own platform. Looking back on this period in 2023, Sarkar, Walker and Moya Lothian-McLean discuss being sought after by mainstream media outlets, contributing regularly to the *Guardian*, *New York Times*, *Sky News* and the *BBC* (NM 2023a).

5. Practice in the Absence of Theory

The success of NM in terms of establishing its "brand" and building an audience raises the question of what its overall purpose is. The argument that digital media provides the soil where embryonic movements may "begin to take root" and "cultivate a circle of allies and agitators who will carry their ideas into the wider world" (Tarnoff 2017) can make it sound remarkably similar to the agitational media associated with the previous, class-based Left, only faster, more vibrant and global. This question, however, needs to be fully considered within the wider context of the ongoing trajectory of postmodern

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Left politics, and the demobilising and atomising role digital media is playing in that process, alongside wider considerations arising from the political economy of digital media. There are key differences between the two models, both theoretical and practical, which bear investigation, and which NM provide illuminating exemplars of.

As we have seen, within the older print media platforms, across the broad spectrum of its many guises, there was a clear link between the politics of those producing it and the form and function of the platform. The most radical of these, from Chartism to Bolshevism, saw their media as a bridge between themselves and other combative sections of the working-class, with their publications linked to specific political goals. Whilst Downing, in his instructive overview of the relationship between radical media and social movements, somewhat mischaracterises the Leninist model as a regrettably "top down" one, he does concede that radical media "needs to be organized within at least a provisional overall strategy". (Downing 2001, 67-69). NM is typical of the vast majority of digital left-wing output, whatever political divergence there may be within that field, in that this relationship is far less apparent. To critically consider the ramifications of this, it is instructive to examine how this seemingly deliberate rejection of unifying theory both reflects and informs the evolving practice of such platforms.

When we enquire as to the theoretical perspectives which guide the practice of NM, there are few clear answers. Despite the ubiquitous Sarkar gaining some notoriety for declaring herself to be a "communist" on British daytime TV (Diavalo 2018), there is a theoretical opaqueness which characterises not only NM but also other postmodern Left digital platforms. In a 2023 video, (NM 2023a), regular contributors to the channel readily acknowledged that there is no ideological cohesion amongst them, with various individuals involved in the project self-describing as "communist", "social democrat", and "anarchist".

When pushed further on her own politics, (Tortoise 2023), Sarkar has referenced diverse influences, including Fanon, Gramsci and Hall. She further declared that "I'm not a Leninist, I'm not a Trotskyist and I'm certainly not a Stalinist (…) I believe in the democratic process", which leaves us little clearer with regard to the philosophical basis of her political outlook and practice, perhaps aside from the fact that her cited influences are all far more in vogue within the contemporary academy than Lenin and Trotsky. Hall, in particular, has undoubtedly wielded a considerable intellectual influence over modern Left politics in Britain, being in the forefront of the phenomenon known as Eurocommunism, but we do not know, as she does not elaborate, what Sarker might think of the key role this acknowledged influence played in rallying support behind the Labour Party's move to the centrist ground in the early 1980s, in which Marxism tended to be characterised as "an obsolete and reductivist system of thought". (Sparks 1996, 78). Elsewhere, NM contributor, David Wearing has praised the online millennial Left for continuing the tradition of Hall, and moving away from "vulgar economism", claiming that such a shift involved "a richer and more sophisticated understanding of how power works", (Wearing 2021).

Any claim to a materialist grasp of "how power works" in contemporary society, however, must involve --- certainly for anyone claiming to be a Marxist --- a coherent theory of social class and its relationship to structural power and social transformation and, following on from that, what organisational forms are best suited to confronting the power of capital. The closest any discussion on NM's channel has come to more fully expounding on the theoretical basis of the politics which drive them occurred in 2018, in the form of a discussion primarily between Sarkar and *Guardian* journalist Owen Jones on the merits of socialism and communism (NM 2018a). This exchange, however, displayed very little desire to focus upon the practical and organisational

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implications of what the various theories and traditions of social change they were discussing involved. This seemingly conscious divorce between ideas and practice also illustrates a linked disinterest in acknowledging or drawing upon the rich experience of the labour movement in order to draw out lessons from its historical successes and failures, as if the history of left-wing struggle began with the student anti-fees campaign in 2010. This wilful amnesia is apparent in discussions ranging from industrial struggle to anti-imperialism, and extends to what often appears as a policy decision to exclude older activists from its platforms.

The closest so far that any NM contributor has come to systematically mapping out a vision of social change in print is Bastani's *Fully Automated Luxury Communism* (Bastani 2019). The fact that this technophile paean to innovation and knowledge abundance contains virtually no reference to class struggle as a motor of historical change, we perhaps inadvertently gain some insight into the politics which inform NM's practice, embodying as it does an essentially top-down conception of social transformation. This is further reinforced by an interview conducted by *Red Pepper* magazine with Bastani (Red Pepper 2015), in which he refers to the "social capital" aspect of such platforms, explaining that "If *Red Pepper* is read by fifteen members of the Shadow Cabinet, that's obviously quite useful". It is notable that this is Bastani's chosen measure of success, rather than a network of grassroots activists within trade unions or an insurgent social movement. In a more recent appearance on NM to discuss the problems that the right-wing *GB News* were experiencing, Bastani described them as "utopians" because they were "behaving like student Trotskyists" as opposed to "a serious network (…) who are actually ingratiated with the establishment". (NM 2023b). This explicit rejection of an activist role was echoed by Sarkar when she told Andrew Neil, "I wouldn't necessarily call ourselves activist, though we do try to cover social movements and activism (…) I sometimes joke that we're Rupert Murdoch ambition without Rupert Murdoch budgets". (Tortoise 2023).

In her recent book, Sarkar (2025) appears to be genuinely grappling with the pitfalls of identity-based politics and the social media that has fuelled it, lamenting the fact that most people experience "politics" via digital screens, but does not acknowledge NM's role in nurturing such a culture. It is significant that in over 300 pages on the challenges of creating a politics that fosters community and solidarity, she does not so much as mention the media project she has been centrally involved in for over ten years. Describing journalism at its best as "consciousness raising" (Sarkar 2025, 19), the link between consciousness, activity and organisation is left unexplored. This omission is the most noticeable feature of a promotional video in 2018 for NM, in which various contributors speak proudly of their coverage of issues in terms of "trying to change the conversation in the mainstream media" and the need to "set the agenda". (NM 2018b). If there were any attempt or intention to give voice to activists at the outset of NM's project, it would appear that this has been superseded by this stated desire to carve out a niche within the existing social structure of capitalism and its media landscape. While there may be a desire to exert a "positive influence on the politics we're covering", the assumption of audience passivity and atomisation is inherent within this model, in that all they appear to be calling upon consumers of their content to do is to "smash that subscribe button". What does this mean in practice?

6. The Poverty of Practice

Following a modest resurgence of industrial action amongst mainly public sector trade unionists in the UK during 2022-23, a NM spokesperson talked of their desire to "deepen our analysis of how these struggles are won or lost." (NM 2022a). Although

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NM was consistently vocal in support of the 2022/2023 strikes, surveying their output during this period, there appears to be very little in the way of critical discussion of the strategies adopted by the national union leaderships involved in these disputes. While an eloquent case might be presented on the channel as to why a union pay claim was just, along with savage criticism of the corporate culture that encourages unprecedented levels of inequality (NM 2022b), no attempt was made to provide a voice or platform to lay activists within the union to articulate a strategy for taking their dispute forward. In 2023, when the general secretary of the university lecturers' union attempted to call off strikes in return for an unpopular deal, NM did not cover the subsequent meetings of union members around the country who angrily rejected it, or, for that matter, even mention it on their numerous platforms. While the channel could have reported live from the meetings, giving voice to activists unhappy with the deal and providing a space to advocate for an alternate strategy, to take such an interventionist approach would have placed them in tension with their self-defined and self-limiting role of a more left-wing version of a bourgeois media outlet, involving questions regarding how to transform the passive consumers of their content into agitators and leaders, interacting with and contributing to that content.

The same pattern is observable in NM's coverage of social movements. Despite its generally pro-Palestinian stance, for example, the same non-agitational orientation has been observable in its extensive coverage of recent opposition to Israel's treatment of Palestinians. Whereas previous print media platforms connected to left-wing parties or campaigning groups would have used their media to galvanise and mobilise their readership, NM did not attempt to mobilise its viewers and supporters in active opposition, or play any role in building the Palestine solidarity protests. It is notable that it has never invited representatives from established anti-war organisations onto its platform to discuss strategies for building the movement, even when they were organising some of the largest protests in British history. Alongside this, it has appeared reticent to mention, let alone campaign for, a number of prominent pro-Palestinian journalists who have been subject to harassment by the British state during this period, despite this being condemned by the National Union of Journalists (Torre 2024).

Issues relating directly to Israel and the supposed antisemitism of prominent figures on the British Left had previously come to a head over the election of outspoken pro-Palestinian politician Jeremy Corbyn to the leadership of the British Labour Party, a move welcomed by NM. It is therefore worthwhile to consider here NM's response to the orchestrated campaign directed at Corbyn, to the extent that it contributes to an understanding of the positioning and practice of the platform. As the weight of the British political establishment turned against Corbyn, the desire to become, as Bastani put it, "ingratiated within the establishment" as a "serious" media player was undoubtedly a factor in NMs response, particularly to the charges of antisemitism, which picked up pace following Corbyn's success in increasing the Labour vote in the 2017 general election (Philo et al 2019).

Leading contributors to NM were being regularly invited onto mainstream news channels to discuss the issue as this campaign unfolded. Bastani, an associate editor at the channel, appeared on a BBC political discussion in 2018, where, in response to a loaded question on why antisemitism was "endemic" in the Labour Party, chose not to refute or even reframe the accusation, going on to explicitly reject the contention that antisemitism was being politically weaponised, and concede the highly questionable assertion that it was widespread within the party. During the same discussion, Bastani also called for the expulsion from Labour of veteran left-winger, Ken Livingstone. At no point was the opportunity taken to orientate the discussion towards the

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underlying reasons for why Corbyn was being subject to such a coordinated campaign of vilification (Ichioku 2018). This was far from an isolated incident. When the prominent Jewish socialist and vice-chair of the pro-Corbyn Momentum organisation, Jackie Walker, came under attack over the same issue, Sarkar publicly referred to her as a "crank", and denied that proceedings against her amounted to political persecution (Sarkar 2018). When the Corbyn-supporting MP for Derby North, Chris Williamson, was expelled after expressing solidarity with Walker, he was described by Rivkah Brown, a commissioning editor at NM, as being "a nasty Jew-baiter" and accused of "sabotaging the movement". (Brown 2020). Sarkar later issued something akin to an apology, stating in 2023 that she had felt politically "paralysed" at the time (Not the Andrew Marr Show 2023), although the possible root of this paralysis in the desire to secure their position as an acceptable face of leftism within the political-media establishment has not been fully reflected upon, despite the significance it holds for the role of supposedly alternative media during times of such crisis.

7. Conclusion

These examples serve not to pass subjective judgement on NM, but to illustrate the fact that the new online eco-systems of the Left have, in the main, not been constructed for movement building, lack accountability to any network of activists, and, relatedly, lack any identifiably coherent theory of social change with which to guide their practice. The movement-scaffolding function characteristic of previous Left media stands in stark contrast to the vast majority of contemporary online leftist content, which requires of its audience only passive and anonymous consumption. There is furthermore no democratic mechanism by which consumers can hold such platforms to any account, other than to behave *as* consumers and unsubscribe, or indeed "smash" the like button a little less.

This passivity has enormous repercussions for such platforms, which find themselves in an inherently contradictory position, on the one hand attempting to establish an alternative media critical of capitalism, while on the other, reliant upon commercial infrastructures which monetise engagement and extract value from user interactions. This has implications beyond the possibilities of algorithmic suppression or outright removal of content by the platform provider. The best of the earlier radical press involved, to varying degrees, the deliberate reduction of the abyss between the producer and consumer of the content characteristic of bourgeois media. This was largely achieved by the reliance on supporters, both writing for and distributing the content.

The primary form of communication between content consumers and producers of the most-viewed digital content is largely the comment section beneath the video uploads. Taking two examples of NM videos from 2024, both dealing with the mobilisation of the UK far-right, we can see that these comments are typically extremely short, partly due to the fact that those commenting are also keen to accumulate views and likes, and more likely to do so with shorter posts. A video titled "Tommy Robinson and his Supporters Take Over the Streets" (NM 2024a), uploaded to YouTube on July 29, 2024, had been watched 204,655 times by August 16, with 4,600 'likes' and 4,356 comments. The median average characters for the first 30 comments amounted to 37 characters. A video titled "Antifascists Turn Out in Mass to Oppose Racists", (NM 2024b), uploaded on August 12, had attracted 35,796 views, 456 comments and 2,100 'likes' by August 16, with the median average characters for the first 30 comments containing 40 characters. If we compare this interaction to that typically occurring in the print media of the class-based Left around forty to fifty years ago, the contrast is stark. *Socialist Worker*, from August 3, 1974, at around the height of its popularity,

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contained articles by a nurse, a Scottish miner, a Nottinghamshire miner, a car worker, and an engineering shop steward. There were letters, all making substantive points, from another engineering worker, a hospital worker, a miner, and a veteran of the 1930s organisation of unemployed workers. An edition of the *Militant* newspaper from August 3, 1984, contained articles attributed to a miners' union member, a trade union activist in the US, a shipyard shop steward, Scottish electrician union activists, a member of the printers' union national executive, and an interview with two Port Talbot steel workers. Additionally, there were letters from members of the miners' union, trade unionists in Liverpool, two Labour Party Young Socialist branches, one from a Labour Party branch, and an activist from an anti-nuclear peace camp. Even this pales in comparison to the Bolshevik *Pravda*, which in 1912 alone contained around 11,000 articles directly written by its worker-readership (Cliff 1982).

Citarella (2020), despite being generally enthusiastic about online leftism, has also highlighted the "severe lack of economic or material analysis" that invariably accompanies even the best digital activism. The theoretical paucity of the content is directly linked to the medium. The pressure in such a competitive, hot-house atmosphere, just as with the online promotion of any product, is for whatever can quickly accumulate clicks and likes and advance in the algorithmic battleground. It is this need for constant "engagement" that now shapes the mainstream media, and is echoed in the Left media as well, mitigating against meaningful reflection or debate. It is the medium, shaped by the assumptions and rationalisations of neoliberal capitalism, that reinforces, as Léger (2022, 10) notes, this "casualization of seriousness". While parties and movements of the class-based Left would often produce theoretical publications in addition to more populist content, which intended to develop a deeper analysis of capitalism and a rationale for their own practice, the majority of online content tends to deliberately steer away from any explicit theoretical underpinning in favour of promoting the "brand".

This would suggest that, rather than being an updated tool to reciprocally facilitate organization and agitation, the digital medium is constructed more to *de-politicise*, being far more suited to serving as a "flagship of the commodification of everyday life" (Leistert 2015, 37), where self-styled leftist content is abstracted from collective organisation, encouraging content creators to behave as entrepreneurs of the self, "everyone a hustler in a sea of competitors" (Day 2018). This is why most digital independent media content is built around supposedly charismatic individuals. The necessity to establish a personal brand, in which self-centred forms of communication predominate, mitigates against long-term political engagement, democratic accountability and collective struggle (Fenton & Barassi 2011).

This problem has been recognised by some commentators from within the postmodern Left. In 2018, Benjamin Fong published his appeal in the US publication *Jacobin* for fellow leftists to "log off", on the premise that "Social media will always be destructive for the Left". (Fong 2018). The malevolent role of the media, Fong noted, was not simply as a result of its misuse, but by the very atomising function built into its political economy, with implications for how the Left communicated both to itself and others. Prior to this, a case had already been made that social media platforms should be more accurately understood as a means of undermining collective organisation and democratic decision-making. (Leistert 2015, Gerbaudo 2019).

The fact obviously remains that most young people, traditionally the demographic backbone of any transformative movement, have now known nothing else but a society dominated by these forms of communication, which are not going to disappear. The early optimism that politics in the digital era could prove more truly

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emancipatory, augmenting rather than replacing face-to-face organising (Downing 2001) has faded, however. While the erosion of that optimism is related to the nature of the medium explored above, the questions posed here cannot be resolved outside the wider task of the broader revival of an insurgent universalism linked to a class-based Left. This, in turn, would need to grapple with what Gerbaudo calls "the death of the *cadre* (…) involved in the nitty-gritty work of organization, propaganda and agitation". (2019,18). This has implications for what Downing rightly acknowledges as the vital "democratic organization of radical media" (2001, 72), which can only exist to the extent that it is rooted within, and ultimately accountable to, grassroots radical organisation, rather than relying upon simulations of political engagement. If it remains the case that "The only real purpose of online activity for leftists is to get people offline" (Jacobin, 2020), an honest accounting of how effective it has so far proven to be in that role is called for.

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